



# Analysis of Host Community-Refugee Tensions in Mafraq, Jordan

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## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Between March 2011 and July 2012, more than 140,000 Syrians entered into Jordan looking for safety.<sup>1</sup> By the beginning of August 2012, around 15,000 of these Syrian refugees were hosted in the transit facilities of Ramtha and the tented camp of Za'atari (Mafraq), while the vast majority were scattered within the local host community.<sup>2</sup> With no improvements in Syria's security situation, Syrians steadily continue to arrive in Jordan.

Mercy Corps conducted a five-day rapid assessment of the situation in the Mafraq area at the end October 2012 in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the increasing tensions between the Jordanian host communities and Syrian refugees living in the area.<sup>3</sup> The assessment relied on focus group interviews with members of both the Jordanian and Syrian communities. Over 45 people were consulted. Key informant interviews were also conducted with Jordanian municipal government officials, most notably the Deputy Mayor and the Director of the Municipal Water Services. Published materials from others groups working on this issue were reviewed as well.

1 See <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107>

2 Precise numbers of refugees are disputed, as the Jordanian government places the figures higher than UNHCR. This assessment relied predominantly on UNHCR data.

3 Despite attempts in March 2012 by a Joint UN task force to publish a Rapid Needs Assessment, no official and comprehensive assessment focused specifically on the needs of urban refugees is available yet. Smaller organizations have conducted assessments of the urban refugee population. The most notable being Un Ponte Per. Their studies have been limited in geographical scope.

This document lays out how and why tensions are appearing in the Jordanian border city of Mafraq.<sup>4</sup> The document describes several sources of tension between Syrian refugees and the host community, detailing how pre-existing mechanisms for resolving these tensions scarcely apply to the current situation. It then puts forward three implications on the future of humanitarian assistance in the area.

## SUMMARY OF TENSIONS

While thus far there have been few violent incidents in Mafraq, both Jordanians and Syrians acknowledge difficulties in the community. Residents and government officials predict that open violence will become more prevalent if significant effort is not made to address the underlying sources of instability between the two populations.<sup>5</sup> With conditions in Syria not anticipated to encourage repatriation over the next year, Mafraq will continue to host a large and growing Syrian population, and efforts to help these two communities must recognize the growing level of hostility between them and work to both diffuse tensions as well as meet needs.

The principal underlying cause of tensions is growing pressure on local resources caused by the large and rapid influx of thousands of Syrian refugees. Already poor, Mafraq has simply been unable to meet the additional demands for basic goods and services placed on the community by the surge in population. Both Syrians and Jordanians are adversely affected by the difficult circumstances which they have now experienced for a much longer period than had been expected. While the residents of Mafraq welcomed Syrians into their community at the start of hostilities, their spirit of hospitality is waning after more than a year of increasing hardship. Faced with a constant struggle for resources Jordanians continue to view the Syrians' vulnerability as unfortunate but now also see it as burdensome. In contrast to the warm reception refugees received at the start of 2011, a recent poll conducted in September 2012 reports that 80% of residents in Mafraq now feel that the Syrians should be housed in refugee camps, segregated from the community.<sup>6</sup>

Both Jordanians and Syrians identify a wide range of problems that define their everyday life. However, not all serve as a source of tension between the two communities. Only a small number of issues stand out as touchpoints for conflict. Around these particular issues, Jordanians and Syrians are more likely to blame each other as the direct cause of their hardship, and solutions are often framed in zero-sum terms.

**Housing** has emerged as a core issue. Rental prices have skyrocketed at the same time that availability has plummeted. Jordanians complain that they have been priced out of their own housing market. Rising rental rates on current property are forcing households to divert a larger portion of their monthly income to housing costs. Whereas a year ago the average amount spent

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4 Situated 80 km north of Amman, Mafraq has a population of approximately 59,000, about 1% of Jordan's overall population.

5 In their survey of refugees in Jordan, Refugees International noted that "the host community is becoming increasingly unwelcoming," Refugees International. Syrian Refugees: Reliance on Camps Creates Few Good Options. Field Report (5 December 2012), 6.

6 Center for Strategic Studies. Perceptions in Public Opinion Toward the Syrian Crisis. Public Opinion Survey. Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan. September 2012.

per month on rent was JOD 50, families are now paying JOD 150-200.<sup>7</sup> Socially, this has had significant consequences. Young men wanting to marry are unable to find affordable options to establish a new family. While the frequency of marriage delay is undocumented, the perception within the Jordanian community is that it is occurring with greater regularity. Resentment revolves around the disruption of this critical social norm.

Jordanians expressed deep frustration over the housing situation and the consequences of having to share limited space with thousands of visitors. They insisted on a solution that favours Jordanian citizens over Syrians when it comes to housing allocation. They also demanded the imposition of price caps so that Jordanians continue to be charged fair rents and are shielded from the inevitable price increases that come from elevated demand. Several more extreme voices suggested that camps were the solution. They suggested that all refugees—current and new—be sent to the Za’atari refugee camp or the new camp that is scheduled to be built. Syrians would then become the responsibility of the Jordanian government and the international community, allowing the residents of Mafraq to regain a sense of ‘normalcy’.<sup>8</sup>



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Syrians also voiced loud frustration with the housing situation. Similar to Jordanians, they are feeling the effects of elevated rents. Syrians increasingly talked about the stress of finding a way to pay the rent every month. As one refugee stated, “you pay your rent on the first of the month, by the tenth you are already starting to worry how you will pay the next month”. The cost of housing was identified, by both women and men, as their single greatest worry. With limited means to generate a consistent and sufficient income, Syrian families are largely at the mercy of aid organisations to help them cover these costs. Yet local and international assistance has declined—especially since the opening of the Za’atari refugee camp—and they have been forced

7 In both Ramtha and Irbid (neighboring Mafraq governorate) an unfurnished apartment can cost between JOD 150 and 200 per month, whereas before the Syrian crisis costs varied between JOD 100 and 120. Covering the rental costs represents the biggest challenge for the great majority of the refugees targeted within this assessment. In fact, 89% of survey participants said rental assistance is their most urgent need. Un Ponte Per. *Comprehensive Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in the Community in Northern Jordan*. August 2012, 7.

8 Mercy Corps’ focus groups did not reveal overwhelming support for housing all refugees in camps, but several participants did make this suggestion. They recommended that all refugees – current and new – be sent to Za’atari. However, these same participants acknowledged that for this to be a viable option conditions in the camp needed to improve.

to find alternative ways to generate income. Coping mechanisms include activities such as selling household commodities and goods at the market, selling food assistance, and working at odd jobs for little or in-kind pay.

The Syrians' coping strategies for earning income have had the unintended consequence of further provoking Jordanian resentment. The sight of Syrian refugees selling food received from aid organisations, and household goods – such as small refrigerators and pots and pans—has generated the impression that many Syrians in Mafraq are doing quite well – much better, in fact, than the majority of local residents. What is not recognized is the precarious nature of the Syrians' situation. Living in exile, many Syrians have few social networks on which to rely as their living situation deteriorates; their social capital is low. Other refugee families are struggling with the same situation and have little means to help. And local and international organisations are also limited in their ability to assist.



Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

The opening of the Za'atari camp has resulted in a radical shift in aid resources away from addressing the needs of refugees living outside the camp toward meeting the overwhelming needs of camp residents. As a result, refugees located in Mafraq's towns and cities are receiving much less attention and assistance. Difficult trade-offs are becoming more common: families who sell food to cover rent are simply eating less than previously; and those selling a refrigerator for cash can only do so once. The next month they are again struggling to find the money for rent.

The apprehension over housing among Syrians in Jordan cannot be overstated. Worryingly, it has led to a palpable feeling of frustration and anger directed in part at the aid community for not recognizing and responding to this vital need. Moreover, there is growing anger toward Jordanians. The Syrians feel exploited by opportunistic landlords who charge what they feel are exorbitant prices for sub-standard rentals, knowing Syrians have little choice but to pay. Syrians feel that the Jordanians are operating under a gross misperception that Syrians are getting money from organisations to pay for rent which, while initially the case, is no longer true. The inability to pay rent has become so problematic that families of 12-15 members have been forced to share accommodation meant for numbers half that size. A perception beginning to emerge among Syrians a year into their stay is that Jordanians are profiting from their misery.

**Competition over jobs** is also straining relations. Already a scarce commodity, employment has become an overt stress point between the two communities. Both sides see the other as engaging in unfair labour practices. The Jordanians blame Syrian men for pricing their labour below the market rate, particularly for jobs in the agriculture, construction, sales/retail and food service sectors. With a foreign labour force willing to work for a fraction of the cost of employing local workers, Jordanian men see themselves passed over in favour of the cheaper option.

Syrians have a different view. Completely dependent on dwindling levels of assistance to meet basic needs, they offer themselves out as cheap labour simply to make ends meet. Many feel exploited by their Jordanian bosses who give little thought to working conditions and haggle for the lowest wage possible. The government does not allow Syrians to officially work in Jordan, and so Syrians have no work permits and consequently no employment rights. All focus group participants agreed that many Jordanian employers exploit Syrian workers because they know they have nothing to lose. Sometimes they promise pay at the end of the month but then retract it knowing that refugees cannot defend themselves or appeal to the justice system. Indeed, Syrian refugees declared that in cases of labour exploitation they would not go to the police because they are illegal workers.<sup>9</sup>

During the focus groups **labour exploitation of Syrian refugees** was considered by refugees to be common, among both adults and children. Refugees report extremely low wages, long working hours, sometimes with no day off. They cite a going wage of JOD 5 per day, if not less, and JOD150 for a month of labour in construction work (less than the cost of housing alone). One Syrian man stated that he was working 12 hours per day, 7 days per week for JOD 120 a month. Yet, the refugees feel they have no choice but to accept such conditions in order to meet the basic food and shelter needs of their families.

The increase in population is also stretching municipal services to their breaking point. **Schools** are overflowing with students, and Syrian families are reporting that their children are being turned away from classrooms. The result is a large, idle youth population whose lives are effectively put on hold as they wait out the end of the war. Young men and women experience the strain in different ways. Unlike their male counterparts, women and girls have limited freedom of movement and are largely confined to their houses. In Syria they could go to parks – places for children to play and adults to socialize, but in Jordan there is nowhere for them to take their children and going out is considered shameful. Mothers report that their



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daughters are beginning to show signs of depression as a result of the isolation and boredom. Young men, in contrast, are becoming angry. Not confined to their homes, they report feeling a heightened sense of hostility from Jordanians, especially from other young men, when they are out on the street. Those interviewed stated that they would rather go back to Syria and face the 'guns of Assad' than stay in Jordan where they are looked upon with contempt.

Both Syrian and Jordanian adults cited **tensions between young men** as a growing area of concern. Young Jordanian men are quick to blame Syrian refugees for the increased hardships they and their families now face. A group of Jordanian youth instigated an attack on several

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9 Un Ponte Per. *Comprehensive Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in the Community in Northern Jordan*. August 2012, 8.

warehouses owned by the Islamic Society, a Jordanian NGO working with Syrians in Mafraq, in September 2012 and are largely responsible for organizing the street protests and tire burnings that have occurred sporadically in the centre of Mafraq city. And Syrian women and girls report greater harassment by young Jordanian men when they are in public. While by no means a common occurrence, Syrians point to several incidents since the summer where Jordanian men have publicly accused Syrian women of being prostitutes. A conversation with the Deputy Governor of Mafraq further highlighted the extent of the problem. He stated that the current difficulties between the Jordanian and Syrian communities have led to a breakdown of respect, especially amongst the young. As the situation deteriorates further, he anticipates even more egregious violations of the norms of respect, politeness, and hospitality that defined relations at the start.

Water and electricity shortages, insufficient garbage collection, overstretched health centres, rising food and fuel prices and other inconveniences are also further exacerbating already frayed nerves. Both Syrians and Jordanians live with the constant worry of not making ends meet in an environment of declining resources. Everyday hardships have begun to take their toll. Whereas they were once united by a sense of family, hospitality, and compassion, these two groups have begun to see each other as direct competitors. Both communities expressed surprise at the duration of the Syrian conflict. They have been caught off-guard at having to live together for such a long time, yet still view the situation as temporary. As a result there has been little effort to create a joint sense of purpose for dealing with the refugee crisis, leading to greater division and a growing sense of animosity.

The **aid community** has contributed to the divide. The rapid arrival of refugees into Mafraq galvanized a local, national, and international response. Refugees acknowledge the huge efforts initially made by community members and aid organisations to accommodate their needs, and they express gratitude for the outpouring of support. Yet, as the crisis in Syria continued, attitudes changed. Syrians, still desperate for assistance, can no longer rely on the original sources of support. Many international organisations have diverted resources to Za'atari camp at the expense of those living outside of the camp. Local organisations simply do not have the resources to act as the primary providers to such a large community, and so their efforts are focused on new arrivals rather than on those who have been there longer.

Refugees report a marked decline in assistance since the start of Ramadan in July of 2012. Whereas before they could count on financial aid on a monthly basis and weekly food packages, Syrians and local aid organisations report that assistance has become more sporadic, with direct cash assistance now extremely rare. Syrian families are becoming more desperate, frustrated, and angry and many feel as if they have been abandoned by the aid community that is supposed to be helping them. They blame corrupt practices by local Jordanian organisations for the lack of assistance, claiming that these groups steal the money and food that is meant for the refugees.

The overriding perception is that aid is not being managed or distributed in a fair manner. In general, around two-thirds of the people who received assistance during the last year declared they are not satisfied, mainly because it was not enough to cover their needs.<sup>10</sup> The Jordanian community often does not understand their plight due to the misperception that Syrians are receiving ample

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10 Un Ponte Per. *Comprehensive Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in the Community in Northern Jordan*. August 2012.

amounts of aid. Syrians report being told to head to Za'atari if they are unhappy – a suggestion to which Syrians take offense given the 'dehumanizing' conditions described in the camp.

Jordanians agree with the assessment that aid has not been distributed in a fair manner. For them, however, the issue is the international and local aid organizations' blatant disregard of the Jordanian community's needs. Initially Jordanians accepted that Syrians arriving in their communities required extensive assistance and welcomed them without reservation. As the situation worsens, however, Jordanians are also requiring help, but receive little to no attention from the aid community. Poor Jordanians blame the Syrians for diverting attention and resources away from them – money and food, clothes for children, and heaters for winter. They question those local organisations that used to provide help and are generally told that they are now serving the Syrian population.

As noted above, a number of Jordanians feel that Syrians should not be allowed to remain in the community but should be required to live in camps. One participant put it this way, "When we put them in proper camps, away from the city, that keeps them away from our problems and us away from their problems." Indeed, Za'atari is on the border and keeps refugees away from the general population. Yet this solution seems both impractical, due to the sheer number of refugees, as well as undesirable in many respects.

## OTHER EXACERBATING FACTORS

Other issues exacerbate the already heightened tensions in the area. For instance, social norms differ between the two communities. Jordanians in Mafraq typically do not go outside after 22.00, something viewed as shameful. Husbands and sons do the grocery shopping, which they complete early in the evening. In contrast, Syrians, both men and women, frequently did venture out at night, as was their custom back in Syria. However, negative comments by and encounters with their Jordanian neighbors have curtailed this practice. One Syrian woman told us, "To live this way? It's not worth it. I will go back to Bashar and die as a martyr. That would be much better than staying here and dying in this situation."

The tensions are mirrored among the Jordanians. As they see it, society in Mafraq is conservative but the Syrians are not. The impression among Jordanians is that Syrians feel they can do anything they want. Jordanians fear the attitudes among Syrians will change the social and ethical environment of the area. As an example, Jordanians claim to see Syrian women being sold into marriage for money, then being abandoned by their husbands and becoming prostitutes. Sadly, it seems there is some truth to these stories. Both refugees and aid officials say they see increasing numbers of Arab men and matchmakers making their way to the camps, some of them by posing as aid workers. Marriages occur, many of which are brokered and not consensual. The results include increasing numbers of child brides and marriages that, in some cases, end in abandonment or forced prostitution. UN and Jordanian relief agencies estimate that some 500 underage Syrians have been wed this year.

As 'temporary' visitors, Syrians in Mafraq have generally found it **difficult to come together as a community**. Women especially noted how difficult it is to socialize with one another. They have no way to entertain and would have to borrow things from a Jordanian neighbour. Many lack friendships locally and often have few relationships with Jordanians. Naturally, Syrians report that some Jordanians are nice to them, but those who are not are remembered vividly. One woman



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reported walking on the street and being cursed at by a group of Jordanian ladies for no reason. They say it is common to hear curses and grievances. “What are you doing here? Lots of people don’t like you because you made life more expensive. You destroyed our life when you came here. We’ve given you our houses, and now the prices have increased and we can’t live anymore.” The issues extend to **children**. Syrian parents either forbid, or try to discourage their children from going out in the streets to play with Jordanian children. They fear they may fight with the Jordanian children, thus involving the families in the disputes, or that neighbours will verbally abuse them. Conditions are so bad that some refugees have begun to voluntarily return to Syria.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Three issues stand out as critical to designing any programme in the area. First, while no one is certain how much longer the conflict in Syria will continue, assistance to Syrian refugees in Jordan can no longer be treated as a short term palliative that ignores the resource challenges of the larger environment. Jordanians in Mafraq are poor and aid programmes that serve the needs of the refugee population must also address the distress of the Jordanians or risk further resentment between these groups, fuelled in part by perceptions of unequal distribution of resources.

Second, competition over resources is a fact that must be dealt with directly. The reality is that relief aid flowing into Mafraq cannot compensate for the low level of development in the area. Resources will continue to be stretched and people will continue to feel the strain of never having enough. To mitigate conflict-generating competition, organisations must work with both Syrians and Jordanians to devise solutions that both communities accept as equitable. Simply throwing resources at the problem does not address the tensions over distribution.

Third, for Syrians and Jordanians to be able to work together, the Syrian community must begin to act as a community. This requires a certain amount of effort on the part of organisations to help Syrians communicate. Already, people track events in Syria by phone, Internet, and Skype. Enabling them to reach other community members locally will help to keep alive the ties that people had before they left Syria, and it will help to build their social capital through expanding their local network. These ties may help to reduce the occurrence of financial calamity and other events that strain the honour of a proud people – happenings that may otherwise lead some to extreme actions. Equally, a strong Syrian community should help to facilitate a range of transitions under a future Syrian regime.



The situation in Mafraq is tense but still not at the stage where open conflict is inevitable. Tensions between the two communities are not a deep-rooted problem. There are no historical grievances that need to be overcome. On the contrary, relations between the border regions of Jordan and Syria have traditionally been strong and deeply connected by family and economic ties. The problem is that both communities are suffering because of the low level of services and mistrust. In situations involving security problems, violence, exploitation, or cheating, refugees seem to be disoriented about where to go for help and distrustful of official protection mechanisms. Most of the participants in Mercy Corps' programmes said that they do not want to go to the Jordanian police because they feel they would not be treated fairly. Some of them declared they would rather ask the neighbours they trust to help them in case of troubles.

Yet, despite some verbal attacks from the local community, especially from neighbours, refugees describe their relations with the local host community as generally positive. Jordanians are aware of the Syrian refugee crisis in their country, and some of them have decided to actively help the displaced community. Refugees suggested further involvement of the local community in helping them, although at the same time expressed gratitude for what is being done. In particular, Syrians complained about the lack of social/recreational spaces and events at which they can meet and establish better communications with the local community. The only places where Syrian refugees usually meet are the charity organisations that distribute weekly food and non-food items. When asked if it would be better for all refugees to live together in the same areas versus scattered within the city, the participants answered that living among Jordanians facilitates relations with them, although they would like to live closer to other Syrian families.

The situation in Mafraq is not a powder keg, yet. However the underlying tensions noted by the assessment do have the potential to lead to violent episodes, which – given the generally low stability in the area – could lead to more dire consequences. Neglecting the problems currently emerging may degrade historically good relations, damaging a long-standing source of resilience that strengthens both the Jordanian and Syrians communities when events take a threatening turn.

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